

TOO MUCH EXCITEMENT

By Cdr. Jeff Penfield

The first night of the “big show,” and I was part of many packages going downtown. From the time we prepped for the mission through execution, I knew it would be a mission I never would forget. I was right but for a completely different reason.

We were part of a multitude of packages. The mission was similar to what we had trained for: night launch, big-wing tanking, rendezvous, ingress, egress, more big-wing tanking, and night recovery. Other than being the real thing, it was not much different than many other missions we all have been on—until things went wrong.

Our big-wing tanker for the evening was a WARP (wing-air-refueling pod)-configured KC-10. Thirteen of us were scheduled to cross the two hoses. On arrival, I was about number eight in line. The wait was long enough that we began discussing the fuel-bingo numbers to the divers on the auxiliary radio. The situation rapidly deteriorated as we went from planned divers to emergency-divert options.

When it was my turn at the hose, the tanker, of course, was in a turn with a bunch of basket motion, 3.8 on the gas. Just another plug: I took my time, made my play, first time right in the sweet spot, sierra hotel.

But wait, what is this? The mother of all sine waves. Where did that come from? It didn't matter, I didn't have time to react. With one quick whip, the tip of my probe broke off. I now was

flying a very thirsty machine, low on fuel, with only one way to get that fuel: on the ground. Emergency divert, here I come. With a little help from a wingman, I got steered to the closest divert.

Thoughts started to race through my mind. “Good waypoint and TACAN. XX miles south. OK, no sweat. Can make it easily.” But then things really got interesting.

We switched the primary radio to the sector control frequency. “Hey, this is me on an emergency divert to field X. Is the field open? Yes, sierra hotel. Do you have some freqs? Standby, yes here they are. Range, fuel, no need to climb. Will be tight but doable. Keep the ordnance. No need to start an international incident. Start making the calls. No one home on approach. OK, over to tower. No one home on tower. Back to approach. Still, no luck. A quick look at the divert pack. None of those freqs work either. Getting closer, time to start coming down. Back to sector control. No luck with them, either. Mmm, not good. Well, I'm landing regardless. Up on guard frequency hoping for a little luck. Got a lot of luck. All bad. No one was interested in speaking to little ol' me. OK, find the field and land. Sort it out later. Now, on with the true excitement.

“Inside 20 miles from the field. TACAN steering up for runway orientation. Getting closer and closer. No significant weather to worry about, except it sure is dark and hazy. Fuel getting low, but almost there. Where is the runway? That’s the \$65-million question: Where is the runway?”

“Nothing is looking right. The TACAN says it ought to be right there. Only darkness is ‘right there.’ What’s that over there? Maybe the field has a big displacement between the TACAN and the runway. Go check it out. Looks short but doable. Two rows of parallel white lights in the middle of nowhere. I made it. Wait a minute. That doesn’t quite look like a runway, more like a road—discernable by the cars traveling up and

land, so here we go. A 45-degree turn to the left. Hold for a few potatoes, now back to the right for a tear-drop arrival. Roll out on what I hope is final. Lower and lower. Where is it? Where’s the threshold? Still enough gas for a go-around if required. There it is. Velocity vector three degrees down. I see the centerline. How far down am I? Any doubt on stopping, take it around for another try. Touchdown. Nine board. Sierra hotel. I can stop it from here.

“Way too much excitement. Landed a fully loaded, low state, Super Hornet on a dark, strange field in the middle of country X. Out of ideas. Had to land or eject.”

What did I learn? Plenty. All my problems started by a less-than-optimum attempt at in-

down it. Agh! Back to the question: Where is the runway?

“Scan in the direction of the TACAN. What’s that over there? Another row of lights next to some big buildings that could be hangars. I’m sure this time it is not a runway, but perhaps it’s a taxiway or a ramp. Any concrete in a storm at this point. Fuel low, fuel low. So, I have that going for me. Time to land and land quickly. Proceed to this second opportunity, only to be amazed with another disappointment. No taxiway, no ramp. Just another road illuminated by lights on poles. Too skinny, too short to land. Once again, back to the question: Where is the runway?”

“What’s that over there? Off to my left? A lighted windsock. Where there’s a windsock, there’s got to be a runway. In extremis now. Have to find. Thinking about ejection options. Got to find that runway. I need more light. Gear, flaps down, landing light on. Bunch of haze. Going lower and lower. Good radalt. Point at the windsock. Begin to S-turn back and forth across my course line. Another windsock down the way from the first. S-turns continue. What is that? The runway. Too much runway behind me to

flight refueling. We all know the take-up on a WARP is scary at best, but I can’t blame the tanker because my plug was not textbook. I made an error in the basics.

Crew coordination works even in a single-seat airplane. The brain already was mashing when I received a little help with the initial steer. That steer helped tremendously as the selected field was not one we had briefed in our element brief.

My survival instincts took over, big time. I was not going to give up. I was going to land or eject, but the latter wasn’t going to happen until I had made every attempt at the former.

Where were my night-vision goggles? On my helmet. I never thought about swinging them down; chock it up to brain mush. Goggles would have made my situation a lot easier, especially since I have made many goggle, light-off landings while evaluating goggles in a former life.

They say any landing you can walk away from is a good one. There’s some truth in that statement. But what about those occasions where you barely can walk because of too much knee-shaking caused by too much excitement.

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